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Why Forward Viral Fashion Messages? The Moderating Roles of Consumers' Fashion Traits and Message Traits

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Social media is being used as platforms for viral marketing. Little is known about the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of fashion consumers engaged in this marketing instrument. Such understanding is needed for social media practitioners to better design and implements a viral marketing campaign because they need to consider (1) whether to use viral marketing, (2) how to design it to appeal to different consumers, (3) to which type of consumer to promote such service options and (4) how to do so. This study attempts to understand why consumers pass on a fashion viral message. This research attempted to examine the factors that impact consumer usage of social media and their behavioral intentions to forward fashion viral messages.

An attitudinal model with research hypotheses specified (figure 1) was proposed through integrating two interactive communication attitude theories (Blumler & Katz, 1974) uses and gratification theory (U&G) and Elaboration likelihood theory/model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). U&G theory explores consumer motivations and how consumers choose

different media to gratify their needs. It asks why people attend to media content and what they get from it. Previous studies applying U&G theory have found that motivations influence individual behavioral intention through attitude (Zhu & Chang, 2014). Thus, motivations are the key to understanding behavior. It appears consumer needs and motivations induce the message virility. On the other hand ELM attempts to explain how the attitude of a receiver can be changed by a persuasive message. ELM states that there are two routes through which persuasive messages are processed; the central and peripheral. The belief is that the producer of the messages could use either one of the routes to better target a message to an audience. The proposed model specified individuals' motivations to use social media affect their utilitarian and value expressive attitudes toward a social media message, and then affect their intention to forward the message. In addition, message content traits and consumer fashion leadership were identified as moderating factors.

An online survey experiment was created using Qualtrics.com and administrated for collecting empirical data from two major universities in the southeastern region of the United States. College students were selected as research participants as they are likely to be involved

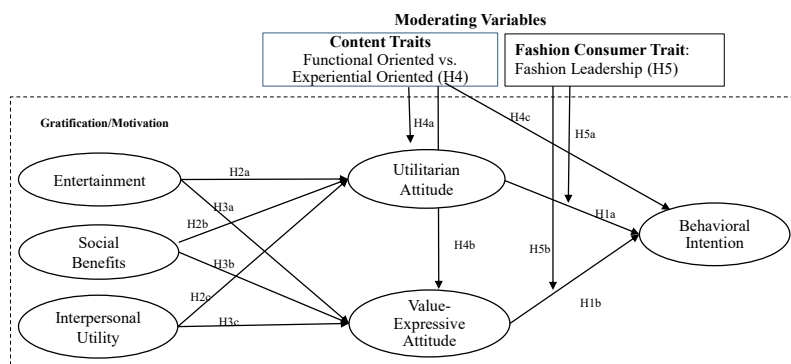


Figure 1: Research model and hypotheses

with fashion and they are part of millennial generation who are extremely comfortable with technology and are wired from birth with no real memory of life without computers, cell phones, and digital music. Two versions of the questionnaire were developed to test the moderating effect of message traits. Each version of the survey provided a link to a social media marketing video and include multi-items scales measuring research constructs at five point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). After participants watched the video clip, they provided responses to the questions assessing their attitudes toward the marketing video.

The Exploratory Factor Analyses conducted on all research constructs revealed in scale commonalities ranging from .652 to .924. The total extracted cumulative variance is 80.37%. Confirmatory Factor Analyses were conducted to test the measurement model and results showed in a good fit measurement model ($\chi^2 = 410.834$, $df = 298$; $\chi^2/df = 1.38$; GFI = .879; CFI = .976, RMSEA = 0.04). Structural equation modeling was then performed on the proposed base model to test the model and hypotheses. The results showed good fit ($\chi^2 = 307.163$, $df = 195$; $\chi^2/df = 1.575$; GFI = .885; CFI = .971; RMSEA = .052). The results demonstrate that H1 was statistically significant indicating that utilitarian and value expressive attitudes increased individuals' intention to forward a social media marketing message. This supports Elaboration Likelihood Theory/Model which argues that, the attitude of a receiver can be changed by a persuasive message. H2 and H3 tested motivations for using social media, results revealed that using these motivations may not increase the degree of positive utilitarian or value expressive attitudes toward a social media marketing message. It can be argued that expect for entertainment, social benefits, and self-enhancement are poor motivators for increasing the degree of positive utilitarian or value expressive attitudes toward a social media marketing message.

To test the moderating effects of message traits on attitudes and forward intentions, a MANOVA test was conducted to test the mean differences of individuals' two dimensions of attitudes and intention to forward the social media marketing message between the groups viewing a functional oriented and an experiential oriented social media marketing message. Results supported H4a and H4b but H4c was not supported. Multi-group comparison was conducted on base model and show there was no difference between responses from fashion leaders and followers. Therefore H5a and H5b were not supported. The results show that fashion consumers pass on viral messages when the message content matches with their cues. When individuals are faced with large numbers of messages every day, they will select what is relevant to them and discard what is not. It is therefore important that apparel firms meet the cues of the consumer to ensure a positive perception for the user to perceive the message worthy forwarding.

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